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ABSTRACT

In March 1991, the Regents of the University of Minnesota voted to close the two-year campus at Waseca (UMW) campus effective June 1992. Student needs were the overriding factor in administrative decision making during the final year. It was necessary to continue current services in a "normal," if modified, fashion, while at the same time initiating new services to deal with the closure. Continued services required retention of faculty, academic advising, maintenance of student activities, athletics, and auxiliary services (e.g., food, bookstore, and health services). New initiatives included identifying additional sources of financial aid, reassigning staff to a student ombudsman role, surveying students to identify all curriculum needs, restructuring registration and course scheduling, and planning for student record access and alumni services after closure. Former students were notified, and some returned to complete their degrees. A Student Transfer and Assistance Center was established to provide special services to help students complete their degrees or transfer. The actual closing date was moved back to allow students to attend summer school classes in order to complete their degrees. After closing, UMW's records will be handled by the University of Minnesota's central records facility. (JSP)

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Meeting Students' Needs on the Titanic: Lessons Learned While Closing a Campus

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INTRODUCTION

In March 1991 the Regents of the University of Minnesota voted to close the two-year campus at Waseca (UMW) effective June 1992. Approximately 1000 students were enrolled in the institution at the time of the decision. This is the first closing of a public higher educational institution in Minnesota in anyone's memory. Although there have been a number of private college closings across the US in the last 25 years, closure of public ones has been rare. We've had much more experience building campuses for the tremendous expansion of American higher education in the last 90 years than in terminating them.

BACKGROUND

The decision to close the agriculture related campus was made primarily by the University's central administration and Regents as part of a reallocation plan. There was no retrenchment mandate from the legislature or desire to close on the part of the local UMW constituencies. Thus an appropriate metaphor for the closing decision is an unfriendly divorce where one party desires the split and the other fights it. Efforts to have the Minnesota legislature "save UMW" were not successful, so intense planning for the closure began in the spring of 1991. The above chronology is a only brief overview of the closing

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resolution, but it does identify the key events.

Planning for closure is not the norm in postsecondary administration. Joseph O'Neill (1983) describes it as playing a film backward--students no longer need to be recruited, donations and endowments are dispersed, employees resign--almost when they are most needed, and new books for the library are not ordered. The UMW community was determined that, although the film was running backward, it was going to be a good showing for the students. After all, it was not the students' fault that the "divorce" was taking place. The main goal of the campus leadership was to give the students the quality educational and student life experiences that they had come to expect, and that students' needs would be the overriding factor in the decision making of the final year.

As the closure decision became irreversible, many suggestions came forward from students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and others on how to make the final year one of the best. Many of these suggestions made very good sense and often paralleled suggestions found in the limited literature on campus closings (see COPA, 1983; Hoey, 1978; Miller and Erwin, 1982; O'Neill and Barnett, 1980; West, 1980a; West 1980b).

In planning for service to students during the final year, it became quite evident that there were two major components to serving them. First, most current services would need to continue in a "normal" fashion, though they might need to be slightly modified. And second, new services would need to be initiated owing to the unusual circumstances.

CONTINUED SERVICES

In a broad sense the college functions that needed to be maintained included retaining a stable faculty and quality academic programming, maintaining quality advising, keeping an active campus atmosphere with student activities and athletics, and, finally, maintaining auxiliary services such as the food service, bookstore, and health service.

In order to maintain quality programs, it is necessary to keep experienced faculty. The University is honoring tenure. All tenured faculty will be transferred to one of the other four campuses of the University after their teaching at UMW is completed. For probationary faculty an incentive system was implemented to discourage them from leaving in the middle of a quarter and encouraging them to give advance notice if they were leaving before their lay-off date. To date, five of the forty faculty have left.

Academic programming was also maintained by lifting the minimum class size requirement. Some classes have been held with fewer than eight students--the previous minimum enrollment number for most classes. In some cases students have benefited through smaller classes and more personalized attention the final year.

UMW has always used only faculty for student academic advising. The faculty have continued in this role. The better part of two faculty meetings was devoted to issues related to helping their advisees cope with potential increased stress, heavier credit loads, and related problems. In the pre-registration process, faculty worked carefully with students to help them map out a year's worth of coursework. Students were

advised about the difficulty of completing degrees if they changed majors beyond their first year.

The students at UMW have always been heavily involved in athletics, student activities, clubs, national student organizations, intramurals, and judging teams. A concerted effort has been made to continue these student development activities as long as there is sufficient student interest. The admission of new students during the final year, even though the students knew they probably could not complete degrees, added enthusiastic new participants to many of these activities. Several of the intercollegiate sports were canceled, but homecoming continued, dances continued to draw students, and new activities have been planned. The maintenance of the traditional student activities tipped the scale for some students in choosing to come back for their second year.

Because some campus services have been self-supporting, students were concerned that the University would cut out those services in a year when enrollment was down, causing these programs to run into the red. The 1991-92 budget included a commitment by the University to continue these auxiliary services as long as there was sufficient demand. Also, a small portion of the campus has been rented to a local business which is adding to revenues of the food service and bookstore.

NEW SERVICES

Because 1991-92 is not a business-as-usual year, new initiatives affecting students were implemented. These initiatives included identifying additional financial aid,

establishing a Student Transfer and Assistance Center, reassigning staff to a student ombuds role, notifying former students, surveying students to identify all curriculum needs, restructuring registration and course scheduling to accommodate student needs, and planning for student record access and alumni services after closure.

By reinstituting the suggestion box a number of ideas surfaced which could ease the transition for students. A major barrier to finishing degrees was the money to stay in school. Some students routinely stop out or only attend part time in order work. To enable this group to stay sequentially or fully enrolled, the University committed an additional pool of financial aid monies to be used for student grants. The extra financial aid has permitted the stop-out students to continue uninterrupted and part-time ones to increase their credit load. The availability of the grant pool tended to reduce the stress level for many non-traditional students.

One of the recurring themes in the literature about campus closings is the need for special services to help students complete their degrees or transfer (Hoey, 1978; Miller and Erwin, 1982; O'Neill and Barnett, 1980; West, 1980a). For this reason, UMW established the Student Transfer and Assistance Center (STAC). The primary staffing for the center was drawn from the college recruiting office and was supervised by an administrator who had just completed a sabbatical as a full-time student. The goals of the STAC are shown in appendix A. Because the center is staffed by admission personnel, students have dealt

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with familiar faces and have sought the Center's help. The STAC office has worked individually with students and their advisers to map out course plans, arranged visits to other colleges to which students may transfer, and invited other college recruiters to campus. The office also attempts to remove barriers for students transferring.

In addition the STAC serves in a student ombuds role. The staff keep their ears attuned to the pulse of the campus. Consequently, every effort is made to deal with student concerns before they become major issues.

The academic planning process included surveying the students early in the spring quarter of 1991 to determine how many students would return for the final year and what courses they needed to take. It also became evident early on that the initial closing date of June 1992 was very unrealistic if the University intended for most fall 1990 starts to complete their two-year degree. Closing the doors in June 1992 would have been equivalent to asking a four-year liberal arts student to complete all requirements in three years by going every summer, and not failing a single class. Central administration backed off the June 1992 close date and extended on-campus classes through summer 1992 and internship courses through winter 1993. This change in the actual closing date allowed more flexibility for students to complete degrees. Also, policy was set whereby students may transfer back appropriate credits for UMW degrees until 1997.

The closing year calendar was examined and modified to better mesh with other higher education calendars in the region.

The specific class schedule was also built according to the survey results of student needs. All of these changes further reduced student concerns.

The records office contacted former students who had accumulated substantial credits, but who had not yet completed degrees. They were notified of the pending closing. Some of these drop-outs have re-enrolled and are completing degrees. This phenomenon has also been observed in other closings. (Miller and Erwin, 1982).

Finally, just because a college closes does not mean that students and alumni vanish. Plans need to be made for student access to records and placement files, and for applying reverse transfer credits. Independent colleges often have to entice a sister or other local institution to take over the records responsibility, but because UMW is part of a large system, records will be trucked to the central records facility.

Planning is still in the early stages as to how and where the alumni services will continue. Alumni coordination is an important function that will need to remain after the closure. The alumni board does not want the UMW legacy to be devoured and lost by the very large central alumni organization; thus a creative solution must be found.

SUMMARY

This paper has not focused on the emotional, personal side of closing, nor has it gone into the details of record transition, facility transfer or personnel severance. Instead, issues directly affecting students during the final year have

been addressed. Even though other institutions may not be facing merger or closure, the experience of the UMW faculty, staff, and administration serving these students may prove helpful to others. As postsecondary educators we all need to listen to our students. An occasional student survey may reveal ways in which an institution might improve its program delivery. Students often have good suggestions for scheduling and curriculum and we need to be sensitive to them. We can always be reminded of the importance of good advising by faculty, one-on-one planning for degree completion, and encouraging student participation in sports and campus activities in order to retain students and create a vital campus. Institutions need continually to examine what services they offer to students and how well they are being delivered. Dusting off the suggestion box, identifying a student ombudsperson, or establishing a "listening time" in the student commons are all ways to sense the pulse of the student body and gather ideas for strengthening services at any campus. Student engagement is a strong predictor of retention.

Educators are better at planning for new programs and for institutional growth. Unfortunately, because of future economics and enrollment realities, we must also be prepared to plan so that downsizing can be rendered less traumatically and a closing year does not mar the exemplary tradition of a college.

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Student Transfer & Assistance Center

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Assist new students to plan for program completion in anticipation of UMW closing:
   a. meeting UMW program requirements
   b. adjusting to changes in plans and/or course offerings
   c. supporting academic advisors in determining options and priorities for course work while at UMW
   d. planning for transfer of courses to other institutions
   e. planning for transfer of courses back to UMW for graduation

2. Obtain and distribute information on programs and policies of other institutions to facilitate a smooth transfer of students to those institutions.

3. Facilitate and support student success at UMW by answering questions, addressing concerns, and working toward solutions of campus academic and environmental problems.

4. Work with returning students wishing to complete programs of study if previous advisor is not available at this time.

5. Contact former UMW students and encourage completion of degree requirements.

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